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INDONESIA

THE BALLOT IN INDONESIA

Since the time it was planned that Indonesia would become a sovereign state in 1949, great interest has focused on the holding of elections there. Not only are Indonesia's leaders attempting to insure democratic elections, but the world at large watches to see what success they will achieve.

What the future prospects are for free balloting in Indonesia cannot easily be foretold, but past and present elections give some indication of the problems facing the voters of the East Indies. For centuries Indonesian villagers have chosen their headmen by direct vote. Methods of balloting vary from district to district, but everywhere campaign issues are discussed before the assembled villagers, this being the chief means for free exchange of opinion among a population that is mostly illiterate and that owns few radios.

Balloting in village elections is also adapted to the fact that no more than 20 or 25 percent of Indonesia's 75 million people can read one of the Archipelago's many languages. When electioneering is over, voters indicate a preference by grouping about their chosen candidate, by casting colored ballots in correspondingly colored boxes or by whispering their choice to a sort of election committee of trusted village elders.

ELECTION DIFFERENCES

Doubtless the chances for growth of free institutions in Indonesia are greater because of its tradition of village democracy, yet there is little in common between village elections and those conducted on a regional or national scale. In village elections familiar personalities are usually the issue, whereas in larger-scale elections complicated questions of policy play a greater role, thus requiring elaborate mechanisms for the free formation of opinion and for their effective expression through voting procedures. Furthermore, in large-scale elections, issues are more easily confused, and the election machinery is more susceptible to manipulation.

For many years before the war The Netherlands sought a gradual transfer of government to the Indonesian people, realizing that this inevitable transfer would take place more smoothly if the people first acquired the skills and traditions necessary for democratic self-rule. The coming of the war and of the Japanese upset this plan in the middle of its execution, but the prewar experience with elections will, nevertheless, be a great asset to the new Indonesian state.

The growth of nationalist political parties in Indonesia dates back no more than 40 years and, despite the fact that they have grown in strength and number, their programs are still frequently vague and "subject to change without notice". Time and the crystalization of national and local issues will remedy this defect, but meanwhile party labels cannot always serve as trustworthy guides to Indonesia's voters. Consequently party loyalties are strongest among the educated minority or when based upon religious affiliation, the result being that most voters are independent and cannot be relied upon to cast their ballots along any predictable party lines. Because there is this large body of independent and inexperienced voters, election results will often be determined by unforeseeable factors, such as a candidate's charming platform manner, an inconsequential faux pas by a party leader or a successful demagogic appeal.

PRE-WAR ELECTIONS

Before the war, members of local and provincial councils and the National People's Council were chosen by indirect elections, a system which gave the young political parties and individual voters the beginnings of experience in conducting large-scale elections. Moreover, even this comparatively brief experience with the ballot has evidently been enough to familiarize the population with voting techniques. In many areas postwar elections have gone off smoothly and have attracted large turnouts, showing that if order is maintained the people are eager and able to participate in choosing their representatives.

Since early 1947 small- and large-scale elections have been held in many parts of Indonesia to form representative governments for the states of the coming Indonesian federation, and to form local and regional governments within those states. In March, 1948, the Minahassa of North Celebes in the state of East Indonesia, carried out the largest direct election yet held in Indonesia. In this election, which saw 325 candidates competing for 25 seats on the Minahassa Council, 80 per cent, or 134,000, of the eligible voters went to the polls. Two months earlier, on the island of Madura, 72 per cent of the eligible voters took part in a plebiscite held to determine the population's attitude towards organization of Madura as a provisional self-governing state. These figures are all the more striking in view of the fact that among the Christian Minahassa all adults over 21 could vote, while among the Mohammedan Madurese all married males and all males over eighteen were en-

franchised. Furthermore, these elections were held without the violence that has marked elections in some parts of South-East Asia, and even in other parts of Indonesia.

VARYING CONDITIONS

So far elections have been held peacefully in East Indonesia, West and East Borneo and Madura, areas in which law and order had been first established by Netherlands authority. Elsewhere conditions have been less conducive to orderly elections. Within Republican sections of Java and Sumatra a few local elections have been held, but even after more than two years of existence the Republic has not ventured to organize an elected parliament, though in June 1948 the Republic announced plans to hold parliamentary elections at some future date.

West Java has held elections under Netherlands authority, but in this area over-zealous individuals from the Republic intimidated the voters, even to the point of kidnapping several candidates and assassinating one. This tendency towards reliance on bullets rather than ballots is not surprising in an emerging democracy, but if it prevails the political coup may well replace free elections in Indonesia. For instance, the Dutch-Republican Renville Agreement of January 1948 calls for plebiscites as a possible means for deciding whether disputed areas on Java, Madura and Sumatra will join a United States of Indonesia as parts of the Republic or separately. It has already been demonstrated elsewhere in Indonesia that where civil order is maintained the population can be expected to take full part in political campaigning and balloting such as plebiscites would entail, but it has also been seen in West Java that some elements in the Republic are not averse to the use of intimidation as an auxiliary to peaceful campaigning. In that event fear of reprisals might make the ballot useless as a means for determining the popular will. Indeed, by June 1948, after six months of comparatively settled conditions, West Java again was the scene of terrorist attacks on small villages, making it difficult to plan for plebiscites in that area.

No people has yet achieved democracy without one or more centuries of internal political struggle, but it is hoped that present plans for a federal United States of Indonesia will establish an internal balance of power among the Archipelago's various peoples and regions, thus preventing an early central concentration of authority that might forestall the growth of popular democracy.

FUTURE PLANS

The Dutch-Republican Renville Agreement of January 1948, provides for organization of a sovereign, united, federal Indonesia, also stipulating that this federation shall be organized by a gradual, step-by-step, orderly transfer of authority to the government of the coming United States of Indonesia (U. S. I.) and to its member states. When the U. S. I. becomes fully independent its federal and state governments will be going concerns, with their powers and spheres of authority already defined and exercised. The election machinery and government functions will have been well established in law, even if not yet well established in the traditions of the people.

Of course, democratic constitutions and legal systems do not insure the growth of democracy nor the holding of free elections, but they are nonetheless an essential step in the right direction, and one further consideration justifies the hope that Indonesia may be spared some of the internal turmoil that has hitherto befallen all newly independent states. It is a truism that democracy cannot long survive, and can certainly not develop, amid poverty and economic stagnation. Thus for Indonesia it is a special blessing that before the war it had become self-sufficient in food, had a favorable trade balance and in a few years will again be paying its own way.

ECONOMIC ADVANTAGES

The economic basis for democracy in Indonesia is particularly favorable because all Indonesian leaders have recognized the advantages of permitting trained foreign technicians and management personnel to operate foreign-owned properties and government utilities, also expressing agreement on the employment of foreign economic and financial advisers, forestry experts, trained agriculturalists, mining engineers, naval architects, and the like.

To be complete, this study of elections in Indonesia would have to touch upon the development there of education, the press and radio, upon sectional differences, religious influences and social-economic stratifications, and upon the repercussions of international political conflicts. Yet within its limited scope this study does show, not only that there are obvious obstacles to democratic elections in Indonesia, but that there is reason for cautious optimism about the future of the ballot there. One American who has known the Indies for years, went so far as to call Indonesia the most hopeful area in the world. Even if his statement is not taken literally, it nevertheless indicates that the United States of Indonesia is being born under a favorable star.

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